

THE TUNNEL RATS

The old lady muttered to herself as she walked along the street pushing a supermarket trolley, and passers-by gave her a wide berth. She had a red woollen scarf tied around her head and a thick tweed coat that reached down almost to her ankles. She was wearing scuffed leather boots with bright yellow shoelaces and from around her ankles protruded pieces of newspaper. One of the wheels on her trolley kept sticking and she had to concentrate hard to keep it moving in a straight line. The trolley contained everything she owned, packed into plastic carrier bags which were stacked on several sheets of cardboard.

She stopped next to a rubbish bin and began searching through it. Her first major find was a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, rolled up tightly. She unrolled it carefully and flicked through it. She beamed with pleasure as she saw that the crossword hadn't been done, and refolded it, slipping it into one of the carrier bags. Deeper inside the bin she came across a Burger King carton containing a barely touched cheeseburger and a pack of French Fries, along with an unopened sachet of tomato ketchup. She giggled and did a little jig around the bin, then packed her treasure into another carrier bag and resumed her journey. There were more than a dozen rubbish bins along the one-mile stretch of road and she checked them twice each day.

Small drops of rain began to patter around her and she glared up at the leaden sky. A raindrop splattered on her spectacles and she took them off and wiped the lenses with a pale blue handkerchief. After she'd put her glasses back on she untied a large golfing umbrella from the side of her trolley, unfurled it, and jammed the handle down among the carrier bags so that she had some shelter as she walked.

The train lurched to a halt, throwing a Japanese tourist off balance. Her husband steadied her by the elbow as the doors opened and half a dozen passengers spilled out on to the platform. The doors closed and the Tube train swiftly accelerated towards the next station. Tommy Reid rested the back of his head against the window and exhaled through clenched teeth. He'd been riding the Circle Line train for more than two hours and he was dog tired. He had a bottle in a brown paper bag, which he raised to his lips, taking a couple of swallows. He narrowed his eyes and stared at the map on the wall of the carriage opposite him. Bayswater was the next station. He sighed mournfully. The muscles in his backside ached and his ears hurt from the near-constant noise. He scratched the two-day growth of beard with the palm of his hand and grinned across at the blind man sitting opposite him, a thirty-something man in blue wrinkled linen jacket and black jeans, holding a white cane between his legs.

The train began to slow as it reached Bayswater. Reid's earpiece crackled. "We have a possible contact," said a voice. "Three white males. Black motorcycle jacket, red baseball jacket with white sleeves, green anorak." The three muggers had struck four times in the last week. Reid sniffed and took another swig at the bottle as the train slowed then stopped.

"Fourth carriage," said the voice in his ear. Reid was in the fifth carriage from the front. He swivelled his head. Through the window in the connecting door he saw the three teenagers board the carriage and huddle together, laughing at something Anorak had said.

The doors closed and the train lurched forward again. Motorcycle Jacket took a stopwatch from the back pocket of his jeans and nodded at Anorak and Baseball Jacket. All three of the teenagers pulled out black objects from inside their jackets, the size of flashlights with small metal prongs on the end, and spread out along the length of the carriage. Baseball Jacket clicked the trigger on his and blue sparks arced across the prongs.

Reid got to his feet and went over to the connecting door. Two schoolgirls moved away uneasily. He slowly buttoned up his thick overcoat, figuring it would offer at least some protection against the stun guns. Reinforcements would be waiting at Paddington, and all Reid had to do was to make sure that no one got hurt.

A businessman handed over his wallet. Anorak took it and put it into a green Harrods carrier bag. A housewife fumbled in her shopping bag while Baseball Jacket stood over her menacingly. An elderly black man was waving his hands and shaking his head, clearly unwilling to give up his money. Anorak walked quickly over to him, thrust the prongs of his stun gun against the man's thigh and pressed the trigger. The man screamed and then stiffened, his whole body shuddering involuntarily.

"Oh shit," said Reid. The muggers had never actually used their stun guns before – the threat alone had always been enough to frighten their victims into submission. He gripped the metal handle and pulled open the door. The noise of the rolling gear rattling down the rails was deafening. He opened the door leading to the adjoining carriage and stepped across the gap.

The three teenagers looked up. Reid held out the bottle and grinned blackly. "Wanna drink?" he asked, pretending to lose his balance. Reid figured they were about thirty seconds away from Paddington – all he had to do was to keep them distracted.

Suddenly the door at the far end of the carriage opened and two men in leather jackets and jeans burst in. Reid cursed. They might as well have been wearing uniforms.

"Cops!" yelled Motorcycle Jacket. "Run for it!"

All three teenagers hurtled down the carriage, towards Reid. Anorak reached him first. Reid stepped to the side and slammed his bottle against the teenager's head. Anorak slumped to the side, falling against two young men in suits who grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground.

Reid tried to bring up the bottle for a second time but Baseball Jacket ran into him, slamming him against the carriage door, then stabbed the stun gun against Reid's shoulder and pressed the trigger. Reid felt as if he'd been kicked by a horse. He tried to breathe but his lungs wouldn't work and the life seemed to drain out of his legs. Baseball Jacket yanked open the door and he and Motorcycle Jacket spilled into the next carriage. Reid heard the brakes begin to bite as the train approached Paddington.

They rushed along the carriage, pushing the two schoolgirls out of the way, the two plainclothes policemen about ten paces behind. Ahead of them the blind man was getting to his feet, one hand gripping his white cane, the other outstretched. The train burst out of the tunnel and the platform flashed by.

"Out of the way!" Baseball Jacket shouted, pushing the blind man to the side as the train came to a halt and the doors opened. Baseball Jacket stepped out, but as he did so, a hand grabbed his hair and yanked him back.

"You're under arrest," said the blind man, slamming Baseball Jacket against the side of the carriage. The white cane dropped to the floor.

Motorcycle Jacket skidded to a halt and held out his stun gun. "You're not blind!" he shouted.

"It's a miracle," grinned the blind man, jerking Baseball Jacket's arm up behind his back until the teenager yelped in pain.

Motorcycle Jacket glared at the blind man, then spat at his face and jumped out of the carriage. The blind man pushed Baseball Jacket towards the two plainclothes policemen, who grabbed his arms, then he tossed his sunglasses away and chased after Motorcycle Jacket.

The uniformed inspector shook his head in frustration as he stared at the closed-circuit television monitor. The teenager in the motorcycle jacket was cannoning down the platform, pushing people out of his way and waving his stun gun in the air. Nick Wright was in pursuit, his arms pumping furiously as he ran. On another monitor Tommy Reid stumbled out on to the platform, still holding his bottle, and was almost bowled over by the fleeing mugger.

"Keystone bloody Cops," muttered the inspector.

"Sorry, sir?" said the shirtsleeved officer sitting in front of him.

“Where are the reinforcements?” said the inspector, putting his hands on the back of the officer’s chair and leaning closer to the rank of monitors.

“Main ticketing area, sir,” said the officer. He pressed a button on the panel in front of him and the image on the central monitor changed to show half a dozen uniformed British Transport Police officers sprinting towards the top of the escalators.

The inspector straightened up and ran a hand through his thinning hair. He watched the mugger run into one of the exits, closely followed by Wright. At least Wright appeared to be gaining on him.

Nick Wright exhaled through clenched teeth as he ran, his lungs burning with each breath. He swung around a corner just in time to see Motorcycle Jacket collide with a guitar-playing busker, scattering a tin can of coins across the tiled floor.

“Stop him!” Wright shouted, but no one moved to help. His quarry sprinted to the escalators and ran up, pushing people out of the way.

“Police!” yelled Wright. “Move, people, please!” Again his pleas were ignored and he had physically to force his way up the escalator after the teenager.

Motorcycle Jacket was halfway up the escalator when a group of six uniformed officers appeared at the top and fanned out. The boy snarled at the waiting officers, then leaped off the escalator and on to the concrete stairs. He sped down the steps, taking them five at a time, as the policemen rushed to the down escalator.

Wright vaulted off the escalator and on to the stairs, twisting his leg as he landed. Passengers on both escalators watched in amazement as the teenager cannoned down the steps with Wright in pursuit.

As they neared the bottom of the stairs, Reid appeared around the corner. His jaw dropped as he saw Motorcycle Jacket running towards him, and before he could react, Motorcycle Jacket ran into him, knocking him to the side.

The teenager was a good fifteen years younger than Wright, and Wright cursed the age difference as he ran. He took a quick look over his shoulder, flashing Reid a sympathetic smile. In his earpiece, Wright could hear the inspector giving instructions to his men, but there was no sign of the uniformed officers. Motorcycle Jacket reached a crossroads and dashed off to the left, forcing his way between two students with rucksacks. The tunnel led to a platform which Motorcycle Jacket sprinted along. Closed-circuit television cameras stared down at them as they ran along the platform.

Motorcycle Jacket slowed as he realised that there were no more exits off the platform, and all that lay ahead was the train tunnel.

Wright slowed, too. In his earpiece, the inspector told his men which platform Wright was on. He heard footsteps behind him and he turned to see Tommy Reid jog on to the platform, some distance behind him.

“I’ve got him, Tommy,” Wright shouted. Reid waved his bottle in acknowledgement.

Motorcycle Jacket turned to face the two men, holding his stun gun in front of him, then jumped down on to the track and began to sprint towards the tunnel mouth.

Wright took a quick look up at the digital display above the platform – the next train wouldn’t be along for six minutes. He ran after Motorcycle Jacket, into the blackness of the tunnel, then gradually slowed and stopped.

The teenager was bent double, his hands on his knees, fighting for breath. “What are you waiting for?” shouted Motorcycle Jacket.

Wright jumped as if he’d been pinched. He swallowed. His mouth was dry yet his whole body felt as if it was drenched in sweat. He tried to step forward, but his legs wouldn’t move. Reid had jumped down on to the track and was walking uncertainly towards him.

Motorcycle Jacket grinned. “What, afraid of the dark, are we. Jesus, are you in the wrong fucking job or what?” Laughing, he turned his back on Wright and began to jog down the track, into the blackness.

Wright closed his eyes, willing himself to follow the teenager, but he simply couldn't move. His legs remained locked. A hand fell on his shoulder.

"What's up, Nick?" asked Reid, and he moved to stand in front of Wright. "You're soaking wet," he said.

Wright opened his eyes. "He got away," he said.

"Don't worry about it. We'll get the bastard." Reid held up his bottle. "How about a drink?"

Wright shook his head. He took one last look into the black depths of the tunnel, then turned and walked towards the platform. Back into the light.

The old lady splashed through a puddle and grimaced. The newspaper lining her leather booths kept her warm but they didn't keep out the water. The rain was pouring down, and even with the golfing umbrella over her head, she was still getting soaked. Ahead of her lay the mouth of the tunnel she knew would provide her with warmth and sanctuary.

She rattled the trolley along the side of the railway line, the rails crusted with dirt and rust from years of disuse. The wheels of her trolley skidded across a patch of gravel and then locked as they bit into the damp grass. The old lady whispered soft words of encouragement and coaxed the trolley into the tunnel. It was suddenly quiet. One by one she removed the carrier bags, then she carefully placed her sheets of cardboard and three blankets on the ground and sat down on them with a grunt.

She leaned over to the carrier bag where she'd put the Burger King carton. She opened the carton with an expectant smile on her face, then took out the burger and sniffed it. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hours old; it was still warm. She took a bite and chewed slowly. Something moved at the tunnel entrance, something small and black that kept close to the rail furthest from her. It was a rat, almost two feet long from nose to tail. The old woman watched it go. She had no fear of rats, and no revulsion either. Like her, it was only seeking food and shelter. She tore off a small piece of hamburger and tossed it over to the rat, but it ignored this tidbit and hurried by.

The man woke as the first rays of the morning sun hit the tops of the New York skyscrapers. Down below, the city's garbage trucks growled through the streets and far off in the distance a siren howled like a lovesick dog. As soon as his eyes opened he sat up and swung his legs off the single bed. There was no clock in the small room and no watch on the man's wrist but he knew exactly what the time was. He walked naked to the bathroom, his feet padding across the bare wooden floorboards. He stood under a cold shower and washed methodically from his head down. He rinsed and dried himself before going back into his tiny room and opening the door to the wardrobe. A single grey suit hung there, with three identical long-sleeved white shirts that had been laundered and were still in their polythene wrappings. A tie rack on the back of the wardrobe door held a solitary tie. At the bottom of the wardrobe were two drawers. The man pulled the top one open. It contained a dozen pairs of khaki shorts. He slipped on a pair, then took the sheets, blanket and pillowcase from the bed and put them in the wardrobe.

Behind the bathroom door was a black plastic bucket and a wooden-handled mop. The man filled the bucket with water and swabbed the wooden floor. When he'd finished with the floor, he used a cloth meticulously to clean the toilet, basin and shower.

The cleaning over, he went back into the room and sat down on a wooden chair, his hands on his knees. In an hour's time he would exercise for thirty minutes, then he would go to a local diner and eat breakfast. He would only leave the room twice, both times to eat; the rest of the time he would spend exercising and waiting. Waiting for the call. The man knew the call would come eventually. It always had in the past.

The rat scurried purposefully down the disused rail track, its nose twitching as it scented the air ahead. It could smell something sweet, something nourishing, something it hadn't smelled in a long time. It was joined by a second rat, a female several inches shorter. A third rat emerged from the darkness to their left, its eyes glinting and its ears forward.

The three rats began to run, their paws crunching on the gravel around the sleepers. Soon they were among more rats. A dozen. Twenty. All heading the same way. Before long the tunnel entrance was nothing more than a small squashed circle behind them. The three rats stopped running: there were too many furry bodies ahead of them to keep up the pace. They slowed to a walk, then they had to push their way through the mass of rodents to make any progress. The sweet smell was stronger, driving them into a frenzy. Food. The food was close by.

Superintendent Richard Newton stirred his tea thoughtfully as he watched the video recording. He looked up as his secretary entered his office and placed a plate of assorted biscuits on his desk. "Thanks, Nancy," he said, using the remote control to switch off the recorder. He sighed and leaned back in his executive chair. "I suppose you'd better send in the clowns," he said.

Nancy opened the door and ushered in Nick Wright and Tommy Reid. They stood in front of his desk, unsure whether or not to sit. Newton continued to stir his tea, a look of contempt on his face. Reid had changed out of his tramp's disguise, but his brown suit and stained tie weren't much of an improvement. Wright was as usual the better dressed of the two, but there were dark patches under his eyes as if he hadn't slept for a week. Both men studiously avoided Newton's stare, their eyes fixed on a point in the wall behind him.

"Tell me, Tommy, what does the word 'assistance' mean to you?" asked Newton.

"Help?" said Reid, hopefully.

Newton nodded. "Help would do. Support. Aid. All perfectly reasonable alternatives. So when the Moles asked for assistance, what do you think they expected to get?"

"Help, sir?" said Reid, frowning.

"Exactly," said Newton. "Help. Not hindrance, not a foul-up, not two of my men making fools of themselves. What happened down there? How did he get away?"

"The guy was fast, sir. That guy could run for England."

Newton sniffed and wrinkled his nose. "Maybe if you two spent more time in the gym and less time in the pub you'd have been able to keep up with him." He picked up his spoon and started to stir his tea again. "What was in the bottle, Tommy?"

After several seconds of silence, Reid shrugged. "I was supposed to be an alkie, sir. I could hardly have carted around a bottle of Perrier, could I?"

"Inspector Murray said you'd been drinking on the job. So I'm asking you on the record, what was in the bottle? On the record, Tommy?"

Reid looked across at his partner, then back at the superintendent. "Ribena, sir."

Newton put the spoon down and sipped his tea. "Ribena?" he said, as if it was the first time he'd ever heard the word. "That would account for the smell on your breath, I suppose," he said dryly, then opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a pack of Polo mints which he rolled across his desk towards Reid. "We're going to need an artist's impression of the one that got away. There's nothing usable on the video." He dismissed them with a tired half-wave, then had a change of mind. "Nick, stay behind, will you?"

Newton waited until Reid had closed the door before asking Wright to sit down on one of the two steel and leather chairs facing the desk. "Are you still living with Tommy?" he asked.

Wright nodded. "Yes, sir."

"How long's it been now? Three months?"

"Five."

Newton traced his finger along the edge of his saucer. "What about getting a place of your own?"

Wright pulled a face as if he was in pain. "It's a question of money, sir. Things are a bit tight just now."

"Your divorce came through, right?"

Wright nodded again. "Yeah, but she's still after more money. There's the house payments, child support, she wanted double-glazing put in." Wright held his hands out as if warding off an attack. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't bring my problems into the office."

"You've nothing to apologise for, Nick. Divorce is becoming the norm these days. Unfortunately." He stared at the cup with its pattern of roses. "Five months is a long time to be living with Tommy. He's one of our best detectives, but his personal life leaves a lot to be desired. You've got a lot of potential, Nick. I wouldn't want any of his – how shall I put it? – habits, rubbing off on you."

"Understood, sir."

Newton's telephone rang and he waved for Wright to go as he reached for the receiver.

The old woman muttered to herself as she threaded a plastic-covered chain around the shopping trolley and padlocked it to the lamp-post. She checked that it was securely fastened before walking into the police station.

A uniformed sergeant looked up as she approached the counter. He smiled politely. "Hello, Annie, how are you today?" he asked

"I've seen Jesus," said the old woman. "On the cross."

"That's nice," said the sergeant. He was in his early fifties, with greying hair and a tired face from years of dealing with irate members of the public, but the smile he gave the old lady seemed genuine enough. "How about a nice cup of tea? Two sugars, right?" The sergeant called over the WPC, a slim brunette, and asked her to fetch the old woman a cup of tea from the machine in the reception area. The sergeant reached into his pocket and gave the WPC a few coins. "Milk, two sugars," he said. The WPC gave the old woman a quizzical look. "Annie Lees, she's a regular," the sergeant explained. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "She's harmless."

The old woman stood up straight and glared at him through the thick lenses of her spectacles. "Young man, I am not harmless," she said, her voice trembling with indignation.

The doctor unscrewed the cap off the tube of KY Jelly and smeared it over the rubber glove, making sure there was plenty over the first and second fingers.

His patient hitched his gown up around his waist and bent over the examination couch. "I had hoped that by the time I became Vice President I'd be past the stage where I'd have to let people shove their hands up my backside," he joked.

The doctor smiled thinly and put down the tube. He knew how concerned his patient was, but he also knew that there was nothing he could say to put him at ease. The examination was purely routine, and neither man was expecting a change in the prognosis. "Okay, Glenn, you know the drill. Try to relax.

The patient chuckled dryly and opened his legs wider. "Relax, says the man. You know when I last relaxed?" He grunted as the doctor inserted two fingers into his rectum.

"Try to push down, Glenn. I know it hurts."

"Pete, you have no idea." The patient forced his backside down on to the probing fingers, biting down on his lower lip and closing his eyes. The doctor's fingers moved further in and a long, low groan escaped the patient's mouth. "I can't believe that some men do this to themselves for pleasure," he said.

"No accounting for folk," agreed the doctor. He moved his fingers gently, feeling for the hard mass that the Vice President's prostate had become. The patient tensed and gripped the

sides of the couch. The doctor continued to probe the mass for several seconds and then slipped out his fingers. He stripped off his gloves and dropped them into a bin before handing his patient a paper towel to wipe himself with.

"How've you been feeling, Glenn?"

The patient shrugged. "As well as can be expected, considering I've got terminal cancer." He forced a smile. "Sorry, shouldn't let the bitterness creep in, right?" He finished cleaning himself and changed back into his clothes. "It's the unfairness of it, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. There's nothing fair about prostate cancer, I'm afraid."

"I can't believe the speed of it all. Six months ago, I was fine. Now . . ." He smiled ruefully. "Now I'm not so fine, right?"

The doctor made some notes on a clipboard. "It's bigger."

"A lot bigger, right?"

The doctor nodded. "It's just about doubled over the past month."

"That's what's so unfair," said the patient. "Mitterand's cancer took years to kill him. Hell, he even stood for re-election knowing that he had it. But mine . . ."

"There's no predictable pattern, Glenn. I told you that."

"I know, I know." The patient adjusted his tie and checked his appearance in the mirror above the washbasin. "So what do you think?" he said, his voice matter-of-fact but his eyes fixed on the doctor's reflection. "How long?"

There was no hesitation on the doctor's part. The two men had known each other for many years and had developed a mutual respect that the doctor knew merited complete honesty. "Months rather than weeks," he said, "Nine, possibly."

"Nine productive months?"

"That would be optimistic. Four would be more realistic."

The patient nodded. He turned around. "Enough time to get my affairs in order," he said. "Ensure a smooth transition and all that."

"How's Elaine taking it?"

A sudden sadness flashed across the Vice President's face. "She's only just gotten over her father," he said. "I intend to spend as much time with her as possible before . . ." He left the sentence hanging and gave a small shrug. "I'll see you next week, then, Pete." He headed for the door. "Give my love to Margaret."

Two Secret Service agents in dark suits were waiting for the Vice President in the reception area. They escorted him to the elevator, one of them whispering into a concealed microphone as they walked.

Tommy Reid carried two plastic cups of coffee over to his desk and sat down heavily. His desk was pushed up against Wright's and they shared three telephones between them. Reid looked over his shoulder and reached into the bottom drawer of his desk. He took out a quarter bottle of vodka and winked at Wright as he poured a slug into his cup. He held up the bottle, offering Wright a shot, but Wright shook his head. Wright was trying to arrange a photofit artist but no one was available. A bored secretary had put him on hold and for the past six minutes he'd been listening to a computerised rendition of something that a child could play with two fingers. He watched Reid sip his laced coffee.

Reid put down his coffee. "What?" he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Wright.

"You were staring at me like I had something in my teeth."

"Nah, I was just thinking."

Reid passed over Wright's cup of coffee. "Yeah, well you don't want to be doing too much of that."

Wright slammed down the receiver. "It's a plot by British Telecom, that's what it is."

"What is?"

“The music they play to keep you hanging on. In the old days they’d say that they’d call you back. Now they put you on hold for hours. Who profits, huh? British sodding Telecom, that’s who.”

Reid grinned. “The old days,” he said. “How old are you, Nick?”

“Old enough.” The middle of their three telephones rang. Wright raised an eyebrow. “I suppose you want me to get that?” he said.

“Wrong, Wright,” said Reid. He picked up the receiver as he took another sip at his coffee.

Wright began pecking away at his computer keyboard. He was working on a report of the morning’s undercover operation and had come to the section where he had to explain what had happened in the tunnel.

Reid replaced the receiver. “That can wait, Nick. We’ve got a body on the line.”

Wright stopped typing. “Jesus. Another? That’s three so far this month and we haven’t even had a full moon yet.” He picked up his notebook. “All the pool cars are taken. Can we take your car?”

“Sure. I could do with the mileage.” The detectives were supposed to use pool cars when available, but if they had to use their own vehicles they were paid a substantial mileage allowance.

They went down together to the car park. Reid’s car was a four-year-old Honda Civic with forty-three thousand miles on the clock and a back-seat littered with empty fast-food containers.

They drove out on to Tavistock Place, headed south to the River Thames and turned right along the Embankment. It began to rain and Reid switched on the wipers. They smeared greasily across the glass.

Wright flicked open an *A to Z*. “Where are we going exactly?”

“Nine Elms, not far from New Covent Garden Market. Nearest road is Haines Street, off Nine Elms Lane. I thought I’d swing across Vauxhall Bridge and double back, the traffic’ll be lighter.”

Wright tossed the street map on to the back seat. “I don’t know why you bother having an *A to Z*,” he said. “You know every bloody road there is.”

“Just one of my many talents, Nick. You hungry?” Wright shook his head. “Thought we might stop off at a pub or something.”

“Maybe afterwards,” said Wright.

Reid snorted contemptuously. “What, want to see it on an empty stomach, do you?”

Wright said nothing. It wasn’t his stomach he was thinking about: he was more concerned about his partner turning up on a job smelling of drink.

It took them a little under twenty minutes to reach Nine Elms. They saw two police vans and a white saloon parked at the roadside, and Reid pulled in behind them. Wright climbed out of the Honda and peered down an embankment overgrown with nettles. A beaten-down pathway through the vegetation showed where the occupants of the vans had gone down to the tracks. The sky was a dull grey and a fine drizzle gave the scene the feel of a washed-out watercolour painting.

“I thought you said this was a body on the line?” said Wright.

“That’s right,” said Reid, opening the boot and taking out a pair of mud-covered Wellington boots. “What’s wrong?”

“See for yourself,” said Wright.

Reid took off his shoes, pulled on the Wellingtons and joined Wright at the edge of the embankment. The two lines down below were crusted with rust and dirt. “Ghost train?” said Reid. He popped a mint in his mouth and started down the slope. Wright followed him, his shoes slipping on the muddy path.

At the bottom, they looked up and down the tracks, unsure which way to go. To the south, they could see several hundred yards before the lines were swallowed up in the drizzle; to the north, they curved to the left. Wright looked down at his feet. A trail of muddy footprints led north. He nodded in their direction.

Reid grinned amiably. “You ought to be a detective,” he said.

They followed the trail. Moisture flecked Wright's suit and he put his hands in his pockets and shivered. Reid was wearing a brown raincoat which fluttered around his boots, and from somewhere he'd produced a battered tweed hat. He looked like a farmer setting out to market.

As they walked around the bend they saw a young uniformed policeman in a fluorescent yellow waterproof jacket standing at the entrance to a tunnel. The tunnel entrance was of weathered stone crisscrossed with veins of moss and overgrown with ivy and brambles. The policeman tensed as the two men approached.

"British Transport Police," said Reid, taking out his warrant card and showing it to the constable. "Tommy Reid. This is Nick Wright."

"Reid and Wright?" The constable rubbed his hands together. "Sounds like a comedy act."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we've heard all the jokes," said Reid wearily.

"Our guys are already inside," said the constable.

"Then they're wasting their time, it's a BTP case," said Wright.

"There hasn't been a train along here for ten years," said the constable.

Wright shrugged. "Makes no odds. It's Railtrack property, so it's ours." He put his head on one side and listened to a rumbling noise from inside the tunnel. "What's that?" he asked.

"Generator," said the constable. "The SOCO boys brought it with them to run the lights."

Reid stepped into the tunnel. Wright stayed where he was. "Nick?" said Reid.

Wright swallowed. "Yeah, coming." He followed Reid into the tunnel mouth. He shivered involuntarily. Ahead of them they could see white, ghostly figures moving around, and beyond them, a bright wall of light. Wright stopped. He could feel his heart pounding.

"Nick, are you okay?"

Wright took a deep breath. "Yeah." He shook his head and started walking briskly down the line, towards the lights. As they got closer, they saw that the ghostly figures were Scene of Crime Officers in white overalls and boots, gathering evidence. Two dark silhouettes carrying flashlights walked towards Reid and Wright, tall men with their hands in the pockets of their raincoats. Wright recognised them immediately and his heart sank. The slightly shorter of the two, Inspector Gerry Hunter of the Metropolitan Police CID, was a good-looking man in his mid-thirties with black curly hair and tanned skin. His sidekick was Detective Sergeant Clive Edmunds, slightly older with receding hair and a thickening waistline.

"What brings you on to our turf, lads?" asked Reid goodnaturedly.

"A uniform found the body and called it in," said Hunter. He nodded at Wright. "Thought we'd have a look-see."

"What was the uniform doing down here?" asked Wright. "Having a kip?"

Hunter smiled coldly and ignored Wright's sarcasm. "A down-and-out name of Annie Lees was sheltering from the rain a couple of day's back."

Edmunds lit a cigarette. "She's a bit crazy. She kept talking about finding Jesus." He offered the pack of cigarettes to Reid and Wright but both men shook their heads.

"Jesus?" repeated Reid.

"You'll understand when you've seen the body," said Hunter. "No one took her seriously at first."

"Where is she now?" asked Reid.

"We've got her back at the factory. We'll keep her for you."

Reid nodded. "Cause of death?"

Edmunds chuckled. "Well, it wasn't suicide."

"The doctor's there now," said Hunter, "but I think it's safe to say we've got a murder enquiry."

"We?" said Wright quickly. "This is our case."

"Yeah, handled many murders, have you?" asked Edmunds.

Wright felt Reid's hand on his shoulder. He realised he was glaring at Hunter and he forced himself to relax.

Hunter started to walk away and he motioned with his chin for Edmunds to follow him.

“Don’t forget your gloves, lads,” said Edmunds.

Wright was about to reply when Reid squeezed his shoulder. “Don’t let them get to you, Nick. They’re just taking the piss.”

They continued along the tracks towards the lights. There was a flash, then, a second later, another. “What’s that?” asked Wright.

“Photographer,” said Reid. They walked by a small generator. A white cable snaked away towards two large fluorescent lights mounted on tripods.

A woman came down the tracks towards them. She was in her forties with greying blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. She was wearing disposable rubber gloves and carrying a large moulded plastic briefcase.

“Excuse me, are you the doctor?” asked Reid.

“Pathologist, actually,” she said brusquely. “Anna Littman.”

“Tommy Reid and Nick Wright,” said Reid. “British Transport Police.”

“I’ve already spoken to your colleagues,” she said briskly, and stepped to the side to walk past them.

“They’re not our colleagues,” snapped Wright.

She raised her eyebrows and stared at Wright with the greenest eyes he’d ever seen. “I’ve known Gerry Hunter for three years,” she said. “I can assure you he’s a detective.”

“He’s with the Met, Dr Littman,” said Reid. “We’re British Transport Police.”

“Sounds like too many cooks to me,” she said.

“Can you tell us what we’ve got here?” asked Wright.

“What we’ve got is a dead white male, late forties, I think, and he’s been dead for several days.”

“It’s murder?” asked Reid.

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that.”

“Murder weapon?” asked Reid.

“A knife, I think.”

“You think?”

“The body’s in a bit of a state. The rats have been at it. I’ll know better after the post mortem. Now if you’ll excuse me . . .” She brushed past Wright.

The two men turned to watch her go. “Nice legs,” said Reid.

“I’m off women just now,” said Wright.

Reid sighed and turned up the collar of his raincoat. “Why would anyone dump a body down here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Bound to be found eventually. If you really wanted to hide a body, you’d bury it, right?”

They walked down the track, their feet crunching on gravel. “No footprints,” said Reid. “And none outside if it was two or three days ago.”

“No drag marks either. So how did they get the body in here?”

“Carried it, maybe.”

“Which brings me back to my first point. Why carry it in here? Why not bury it?”

A Scene of Crime Officer stood up and stretched. He was in his fifties with steel-grey hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses. “Nice day for it,” he said.

“Found anything?” asked Wright.

“Lots of stuff. Problem is knowing what’s relevant. Down-and-outs have been sleeping here, kids playing around, dogs, cats, rats. There’s litter, used condoms, sweet wrappers, empty bottles, cigarettes. We’ll bag it and tag it, but as to what’s relevant and what isn’t, well, your guess is as good as mine.”

“No sign of a murder weapon?” asked Wright.

The man snorted softly. “No, and I haven’t come across a signed confession. But if I do . . .”

Reid and Wright walked past one of the tripod lights. A woman in white overalls was kneeling down, examining a wooden sleeper. Wright flinched at a bright flash of light. The

photographer was a small, squat man in a dark suit, standing with his back to them. He took a step back, adjusted his focus and took another picture of something against the tunnel wall.

Wright moved to the side to get a better look. "Jesus Christ," he whispered.

"Yeah, practically crucified," said the photographer laconically. "I don't think they cut Jesus's dick off, though, did they?" He turned his camera side on and took another photograph. "Who are you guys with?" he asked.

"British Transport Police," said Reid.

"Don't think he was hit by a train," said the photographer.

A young man in blue overalls joined them carrying a large metal suitcase. He placed it on a sleeper and opened it to reveal a large video camera and a halogen light. "Are you going to want the video, then?" he asked, pulling the camera out of its foam rubber packing.

"Yeah," said Wright, handing him a BTP business card.

The body was naked, spreadeagled against the wall, the hands impaled on thick nails. The man's groin was a mass of blood, and strips of flesh had been ripped from his chest, arms and legs. A knife had been thrust into his chest.

"That's not what I think it is in his mouth, is it?" asked Reid.

Wright leaned forward. Between the man's teeth was a piece of bloody flesh. Wright's stomach lurched. He screwed up his face in disgust. "What sort of sick bastard would do that?" he whispered.

"Black magic?" said Reid. "Some sort of Satanic ritual?"

Wright shook his head. "There'd be symbols. Candles. Stuff like that. This guy's been tortured to death." He took a step closer to the body. There was something impaled on the knife. A playing card. Blood from the man's face had trickled down over the card. Wright reached out his hand.

"Don't even think about touching that!" boomed a voice.

Wright looked around. The grey-haired man in overalls was standing behind Wright holding a polythene evidence bag. "I wasn't going to touch anything," said Wright defensively.

"Who are you anyway?" asked the man. "Gerry Hunter's already been over the crime scene."

"I'm Nick Wright. This is Tommy Reid. British Transport Police."

"Been at many crime scenes, have you, Mr Wright?"

"What?"

The man sealed the evidence bag. Inside was a cigarette packet. "Standard procedure is for detectives to wear gloves and shoe covers before they go trampling over a crime scene."

"Yeah, well, we'll watch where we put our feet," said Wright. "And it's Sergeant Wright. What about the victim's clothes?"

"No sign of them. Assuming he didn't walk in naked, the murderer must have taken them with him."

Wright put his hands in his pockets and turned to look at the body again. He peered at the playing card. "Ace of spades," he said. "Now what the hell's the significance of that?"

"Bridge game got a bit nasty, do you think?" said Reid.

"It must mean something, Tommy. Someone went to a lot of trouble to stick that on his chest."